

## Introduction: Getting the Idea

It was 1963 when I first connected philosophy with childhood. Our family cat, Fluffy, had contracted fleas. I announced that I would have to take Fluffy into the basement to fumigate her. Our older daughter, Sarah, then four years old, asked if she could watch. Reluctantly I agreed—with the proviso that Sarah should stand high on the stairs, so that she would not herself breathe in the anti-flea dust I was about to administer to the cat.

From her perch at the head of the stairs, Sarah watched this primitive ritual with great interest. "Daddy," she asked after a while, "how did Fluffy get fleas?"

"Oh," I replied nonchalantly, "she must have been playing with another cat; fleas must have jumped off the other cat onto Fluffy."

Sarah reflected. "How did *that* cat get fleas?" she asked.

"Oh, it must have been playing with yet another cat," I answered jauntily; "they must have jumped off that cat onto the one Fluffy later played with."

Sarah paused. "But Daddy," she said earnestly, "it can't go on and on like that forever; the only thing that goes on and on like that forever is numbers!"

At the time of this incident I was teaching philosophy at the University of Minnesota. One of the standard topics in several of the courses I taught there was the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God. That argument depends upon ruling out an infi-

nite regress of causes, so as to prove the existence of the First Cause, which, St. Thomas Aquinas assures us with surprising aplomb, we all call "God." I can remember thinking, "Here I am teaching my university students the argument for a First Cause, and my four-year-old daughter comes up, on her own, with an argument for the First Flea!"

At that time I knew very little about developmental psychology. Oh, I knew something about Jean Piaget. I had even heard him lecture (in French! which was a challenge for me) when I was a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. I certainly knew something about Piaget's famous conservation experiments. But I did not understand that Piaget's theory made no allowance whatsoever for the philosophical thinking of my daughter, who, according to Piagetian theory, still lingered in the antechamber of "pre-operational thought."

I can remember telling the story of Sarah and the fleas from time to time, at parties, usually. But I had no inkling that I might one day try to make a case for the naturalness with which, like Sarah, many young children do philosophy on their own initiative. Certainly I did not appreciate the many connections between philosophy and childhood that I hope to bring out in this book.

Some six years after the flea incident, my family and I moved east, where I took up a position at the University of Massachusetts. Our arrival in Massachusetts coincided with the local onset of what was then called, rather patronizingly, I thought, "student unrest." At my new campus there were strikes, bomb scares, and countless demonstrations. I was myself quite opposed to the Vietnam war. So, although already ten years away from being a student, I joined in at least some of this "student unrest." More than once I went with busloads of protesters, mostly students, to Washington to register my own dissent.

At this time I noticed a phenomenon in my philosophy classroom that slowly began to trouble me. Some of my best students—certainly not all of them, but some of the most appealing

ones—expressed to me the suspicion that philosophy was a plot by "the Establishment" to distract the attention of college students, especially male students, from the issues of life and death raised by the Vietnam war.

How could anyone possibly think that my beloved philosophy was an Establishment plot? I was hurt. I didn't know how to respond. How does one deal with a suspicion like that?

Thanks especially to the pioneering work of Matthew Lipman and his associates at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in Montclair, New Jersey, philosophy is today gradually making its appearance throughout the school curriculum, kindergarten through twelfth grade. But two decades ago, at the time of this Vietnam "unrest," philosophy was almost the only prominent college subject that a student would probably not have encountered in any curricular form before college. Anyone even slightly paranoid about "the Establishment" might well find this striking fact suspicious.

As I, in fact, believed, some parts of philosophy might actually help a student think more deeply and more clearly about the issues of war and peace. But most parts would not do that, or at least not do so directly. I did not want to hold my discussions of, say, Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," or Aquinas's Cosmological Argument, hostage to some dubious connection between them and issues in, say, Just War Theory, or questions about the limits of morality.

One night, while I was reading a bedtime story to my son, John, then about three years old, it occurred to me that the story I was reading raised a philosophical issue that I planned to discuss with my university students the next day. So I took the story along to class on the following day. I began my lecture by reading the story I had brought from home. (I can no longer remember for sure what the story was, but it may have been James Thurber's *Mary Moons*, a favorite of all my children. That story deals whimsically with perceptual illusions, and especially with the apparent

size of the moon.) "Can you remember thinking about this problem when you were little?" I asked my students after I had read them the story. "If you can," I continued, "the class today will give you a chance to return to familiar territory."

My aim was—and is, for I sometimes follow this practice even today—to convince my students that philosophy is a natural activity, quite as natural as making music and playing games. To be sure, the study of philosophy has certain practical uses. It is good preparation for certain vocations, like the law, that reward clear thinking and strong reasoning. But, like poetry, philosophy is also its own reward.

I'm not sure how successful I was in winning over my Vietnam-era cynics. But I certainly did sharpen my own realization of the fact that there is an important strand of children's literature that is genuinely philosophical. I am fond of telling anyone who will listen that, for example, Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad Together*, which is so simple in its vocabulary as to count as an "I can read book," is also a philosophical classic (see Chapter 9).

It was a natural next step in my slow awakening to the connections between philosophy and children to write a paper on philosophy and children's literature. At the urging of a friend I submitted the paper to the program committee of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, and, when it was accepted, read it to a gathering of philosophers in San Francisco. I found, somewhat to my surprise, that not just elementary school teachers but even other professional philosophers were interested in the connections I could demonstrate between philosophy and children's literature. I then became interested in exploring the philosophical thinking in children to which the authors of philosophical children's stories were appealing. That brought me back to Sarah and the fleas.

Eventually I wrote *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Harvard, 1980), which has as its main thesis that some children naturally raise questions, make comments, and even engage in reasoning that

professional philosophers can recognize as philosophical. When, at the very beginning of that book, Tim, age six, asks, "Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?" he raises one of the oldest and most persistently baffling questions in philosophy. And when Tim later seeks to reassure his father with the reasoning, "If it was a dream, we wouldn't go around asking if it was a dream," he offers a solution to this problem that can be usefully compared with the responses of Plato and Descartes.

My informal research suggests that such spontaneous excursions into philosophy are not at all unusual for children between the ages of three and seven; in somewhat older children, though, even eight- and nine-year-olds, they become rare, or at least rarely reported. My hypothesis is that, once children become well settled into school, they learn that only "useful" questioning is expected of them. Philosophy then either goes underground, to be pursued privately, perhaps, and not shared with others, or else becomes totally dormant.

To establish for myself that somewhat older children can, if deliberately provoked, still respond imaginatively and resourcefully to philosophical questions, I developed the technique of writing story-beginnings in which the characters, mostly children, stumble, unaided by adults, on some philosophical issue or problem. Freddie, say, goes aboard an old ship, which, he learns, has had 85 percent of her boards replaced. During the shipboard tour Freddie feels proud to be able to walk the decks of "the oldest square-rigger afloat." But his older sister, when she hears of the piece-by-piece replacement of most of the original boards, ridicules Freddie's boast. "With 85 percent of the boards brand new, that ship could hardly be an old one, never mind the oldest square-rigger afloat," she sneers. At this expression of skepticism my story-beginning comes to an end.

With a story-beginning like this in hand I visited classrooms, where I asked the children how the story ought to go on. Without hesitation they launched into spirited discussions of the vexing

*Reynolds  
W. K. King  
Wife*

questions of identity through time that the story raises. They compared ships to bicycles or cars, whose original parts are gradually replaced over time. They sometimes even discussed the gradual displacement of cells in their own bodies. And they soon took up recognizable positions on the requirements for a ship, or a bicycle, or a human body to persist through time.

One child might say that there is a new ship when more than half the timbers have been replaced. Another might allow that the old ship still sails the seas as long as at least one of the original boards remains. Still another might suggest that there is a new ship as soon as the very first board is replaced. Someone would single out one particular part of the vessel as essential for the persistence of the old ship—the keel, perhaps, or the mast, or the wheel. Someone else might be satisfied that the old ship still sails the seas as long as the replacement of boards is gradual and the ship continues to sail her familiar routes.

I have used this story-beginning technique in various schools in this country and abroad. My book *Dialogues with Children* (Harvard, 1984) is an account of my successes with it in a small class of eight- to eleven-year-olds in a music school in Scotland. The book is also an introduction to philosophy through the voices (and minds!) of children.

So far I have talked about children as philosophers. How might one get from that topic to the idea that there could be such a subject as the philosophy of childhood?

My own journey began with reflections on why it seems surprising that young children, many of them, are naturally philosophical. What ideas about children and the nature of childhood had I previously accepted, I asked myself, that made it so surprising to me that children would naturally take to philosophy? Perhaps the very notion of a child was elusive or problematic in a way that I had not appreciated, had not even stopped to consider.

Four years before the publication of my *Dialogues with Children*,

Matthew Lipman had in fact suggested in a symposium at the annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association that we might think of the philosophy of childhood in analogy to the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of art, the philosophy of history, and the many other, already familiar, "philosophy of x" subjects currently recognized in college curricula.

Just as people say all sorts of philosophically problematic things about God, about quantum physics, about what counts as a work of art, or the cause of some historical event, so they also say philosophically problematic things about childhood. So Mat's suggestion was, in effect, that we philosophers might well turn our attention to questions like these:

What is it to be a child?

How do children's ways of thinking differ from "ours"?

Do young children have the capacity to be really altruistic?

Might it be that children have the right to "divorce" their parents?

Might some works of child art be artistically or aesthetically as good as "stick figures" or blotches of paint by some famous modern artist?

Does literature that is written by adults for children have to be, for that very reason, inauthentic?

I can remember resisting Mat's suggestion at first, but I soon came to accept it. In 1985, and again in 1988, I directed an NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers under the title "Issues in the Philosophy of Childhood." I chose the title carefully. Wishing to avoid the task of proving to the National Endowment for the Humanities that the philosophy of childhood is, indeed, a legitimate subject for academic enquiry analogous to the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of mathematics, and the rest, I made as if I were simply selecting issues for discussion from an already accepted field of enquiry.

None of the twelve participants in each of those two seminars seemed to have any difficulty in accepting the idea that the phi-

osophy of childhood should be recognized as a legitimate field of inquiry. We began our time together by thinking about our concept of childhood, a concept which turns out to be historically and culturally, as well as philosophically, problematic.

Our concept of childhood is historically problematic in that the notion we have of childhood may be a modern invention.<sup>1</sup> In earlier periods children seem to have been recognized as "little people," who, of course eat less and can do less work than "big people," but who may not be thought to differ in the *kinds* of tasks they can be assigned or in the *ways* they think or behave.

The concept of childhood is culturally problematic in that it is not shared fully by all other cultures. Margaret Mead tells about a Pacific Island culture in which stories are thought to be for adults, but not for children. Far from being a world of fantasy and imagination, childhood, in this culture, is a time of realistic and prosaic thought.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the concept of childhood is philosophically problematic in that genuinely philosophical difficulties stand in the way of saying just what *kind* of difference the difference between children and adult human beings is.

We moved on in those two NEH Seminars to take up some of the topics that will occupy the succeeding chapters of this book. We talked about the ways that are available for understanding what it is to be a child, including the theory that the development of each human being recapitulates the history of the development of the human species (see Chapter 2). We discussed theories of cognitive development in children, especially the developmental theory of Jean Piaget (see Chapters 3 and 4). And we considered theories of moral development (see Chapter 5). We discussed art by children (Chapter 10) and literature for children (Chapter 9). And, of course, we debated children's rights (Chapter 6).

In fact, of the topics to be taken up in the following chapters, it is only Childhood Amnesia (Chapter 7) that was not an explicit part of our agenda. But even that subject slipped in occasionally

with some remark to the effect that part of what makes early childhood so mysterious and so intriguing is that none of us can remember having been a very young child.

So I have been won over to Matthew Lipman's suggestion. It now seems to me quite clear that childhood, including the ideas and theories that people have about it, are, indeed, worthy of philosophical examination and critique. And I have taught my first course, at Mount Holyoke College, under the title "The Philosophy of Childhood."

In this book I do not try to give a full account of what might be included in this new subject, the philosophy of childhood. Instead, I present a personal response to some of the issues that belong to it. But in presenting *a* philosophy of childhood, indeed, something of *my own* philosophy of childhood, I hope to help secure a place in the philosophy curriculum of the future for *the* philosophy of childhood as a genuine area of academic research, writing, and teaching.

## 1

## A Philosopher's View of Childhood

"Do you think there could be any such thing as the beginning of time?" I asked the dozen third and fourth graders in my philosophy discussion group in Newton, Massachusetts. (We had been trying to write a story about time travel.)

"No," several of the kids replied.

Then Nick spoke up. "The universe is everything and everywhere," he announced, and then paused. "But then if there was a big bang or something, what was the big bang *in*?"

Nick's question had long puzzled me, too. In my own case, hearing lectures on the "big bang" theory of the origin of the universe given by learned astrophysicists and cosmogonists had never quelled the conceptual worry that Nick articulated so simply and directly.

At the time of this discussion Nick had just turned nine years old. The others in the group were anywhere from nine to ten and a half.

Not only did Nick have a genuine puzzle about how the universe could have begun, he also had a metaphysical principle that required beginnings for everything, the universe included. Everything there is, he said, has a beginning. As he realized, that principle reintroduces the problem about the universe. "How did the universe start?" he kept asking.

"The universe," said Sam, "is what everything appeared *on*. It's not really anything. It's what other things started *on*."

"So there always has to be a universe?" I asked.

"Yeah," agreed Sam, "there always has to be a universe."

"So if there was always a universe," I went on, "there was no first time, either."

"There was a first time for certain things," explained Sam, "but not for the universe. There was a first time for the earth, there was a first time for the stars, there was a first time for the sun. But there was no first time for the universe."

"Can you convince Nick that the universe has to always be there?" I asked Sam.

Sam replied with a rhetorical question. "What would the universe have appeared *on*?" he asked simply.

"That's what I don't understand," admitted Nick.

Sam's conception of the universe (what everything else appears "on") is reminiscent of Plato's idea of the "receptacle" in his dialogue *Timaeus*: "... the mother and receptacle of all created and visible and in any way sensible things is not to be termed earth or air or fire or water, or any of their compounds, or any of the elements from which these are derived, but is an invisible and formless being which receives all things..." (*Timaeus* 51A). On this view the universe itself never came to be; it is what other things come to be in, or "on." If, as Ross, another child in the same group, put the point later in our discussion, things "started out on vast blackness, then that's just the universe then; the universe is vast blackness."

I have said that Sam's conception is reminiscent of Plato's. But there is a respect in which Sam's idea may be superior to Plato's. The idea of a receptacle is the idea of a container. A container walls some things in and other things out. To wall things in and out it must have walls. Sam's idea of what other things appear "on" projects three-dimensional reality onto two dimensions, but it

allows us to think of the "ground of being" as having indefinite borders. Whether the universe is finite or infinite can be left indeterminate. By contrast, Plato's receptacle must be finite. Moreover, we must wonder what the nature of the receptacle's walls could be, though there is no answer to this question in Plato.

In our discussion Nick never gave up his principle that everything there is has a beginning. But he remained puzzled about how this principle could be applied to the universe itself. Every time he was asked what the universe could have first appeared on, he replied with engaging candor, "That's the part I don't get." Of course it was he who first raised this problem with his principle that everything there is has a beginning.

Many people are familiar with Saul Steinberg's *New Yorker* cover depicting the New Yorker's view of the country. Manhattan Island dominates the scene; the other boroughs of New York City are prominent, though smaller than Manhattan. San Francisco is to be seen in the distance at the other coast. And there is not much in between.

A philosopher's view of childhood is likely to be just as distorted. On the philosopher's view, children sit around conducting virtuoso discussions of mind-bending questions like 'Did the universe itself have a beginning, and if so, what did it begin on?' Although I have tried to document in my writings the claim that *some* children *sometimes* do this, even I would have to admit that this sort of activity is not the most obvious feature of childhood.

Still, it is worth pointing out that discussions such as the one I have just recorded can, and sometimes do, occur. There are at least two reasons why it is important to point this out. First, philosophical thinking in children has been left out of the account of childhood that developmental psychologists have given us. Even if philosophical thinking is far from the most prominent feature of childhood, its presence should be duly noted. For one thing, leaving it out encourages undeserved condescension toward chil-

children. If the most daunting intellectual challenges that Sam and Nick face are to learn the twelve-times table and the passive form of the verb "to be," condescension toward these children as thinkers has some warrant in fact. But if Sam and Nick can raise for us in vivid and compelling form the puzzles of how the universe could have begun, then there are at least some contexts in which they should be considered our partners in a joint effort to understand it all.

There is a second reason why it is important to take due account of philosophical thinking in young children. Doing so helps us understand philosophy.

Much of philosophy involves giving up adult pretensions to know. The philosopher asks, "What is time, anyway?" when other adults assume, no doubt unthinkingly, that they are well beyond the point of needing to ask that question. They may want to know whether they have enough time to do the week's shopping, or to pick up a newspaper. They may want to know what time it is, but it doesn't occur to them to ask, "What is time?" St. Augustine put the point well: "What, then, is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. But if I want to explain it to a questioner, I am baffled" (*Confessions* 11.14). Among the annoying questions that children ask are some that are genuinely baffling. In important part, philosophy is an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood.

I can't remember asking myself, as a child, what time is. But I did puzzle over the beginning of the world. My puzzlement as a child of five or six took the form of the following question: 'Supposing that God created the world at some particular time, how is it that the world looks as though it had been going on forever?'

I know now that my problem in cosmogony was a bit like that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Like me, Aquinas accepted the Christian doctrine that God created the world, indeed, created it, Aquinas supposed, out of nothing. (I don't know now whether the *ex nihilo* part belonged to my theology as a six-year-old.) But Aquinas was

also very respectful of Aristotle's arguments for the eternity of the world. He had, then, somehow, to reconcile the appearance of beginninglessness, as captured in Aristotle's rather impressive reasoning, with the revealed doctrine of creation, which, he thought, was an absolute beginning.

For myself—that childhood self—I came up with an analogy. Having posed my question to my mother and received no helpful response, I returned later to reassure her. "Don't worry, Mom," I said, "I think it's like a perfect circle someone has drawn. If you had been there when it was drawn, you would know where the circle begins. But as you look at it now, there's no way of telling. It's like a perfect circle, where the end connects up with the beginning without showing."

When now, sixty years later, I teach Aristotle or Aquinas to university students, I try to locate the questioning child in me and my students. Unless I do so, the philosophy we do together will lose much of its urgency and much of its point.

Let's return to the point about respecting children as partners in inquiry. Parents and teachers are often so impressed with the burdens they bear in having to nurture, instruct, reassure, and inspire their children that they fail to appreciate what children have to offer adults. One of the exciting things that children have to offer us is a new philosophical perspective.

Consider the case of Kristin, who was four years old. She was teaching herself to use watercolors. As she painted, she began to think about the colors themselves. Sitting on her bed, talking to her father, she announced, "Dad, the world is all made of colors."

Kristin's father, who, as I happen to know, wants to make sense of it all as much as his four-year-old daughter did, liked Kristin's hypothesis, and reacted positively. But, recognizing a difficulty, he asked her, "What about glass?"

Kristin thought for a moment. Then she announced firmly, "Colors and glass."

Like any good philosopher, Kristin knew what to do when one's

grand hypothesis runs into a counterexample. One simply incorporates the counterexample into the hypothesis!

Kristin's color hypothesis is not only fresh and exciting—at least as uniquely wonderful a gift to her father, I should say, as any one of the watercolor pictures she might have presented to him—it also recalls the thinking of the earliest philosophers we have any record of, the ancient Milesians. Like Kristin, the Milesians wanted to know what everything is made of. Thales said "Water" (presumably he thought that the earth was something like frozen or compacted water, and that air was very rarefied steam); Anaximander said "The infinite" or "The indefinite"; whereas Anaximenes said "Air." (I like Kristin's hypothesis better than any of these.)

A later anecdote from Kristin recalls another pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides. Kristin was five, and learning how to read. She was learning to recognize syllables and to sound them out so as to be able to recognize words. She was quite proud of her success.

Again, sitting on her bed talking to her father, she commented, "I'm sure glad we have letters."

Kristin's father was somewhat surprised at that particular expression of gratitude. "Why?" he asked.

"Cause if there was no letters, there would be no sounds," explained Kristin. "If there was no sounds, there would be no words . . . If there was no words, we couldn't think . . . and if we couldn't think, there would be no world."

Kristin's chain reasoning is breathtaking. It is also reminiscent of Parmenides' enigmatic fragment to *gar auto noein estin te kai einai* ("For the same thing is there both to be thought of and to be"). That might be understood to entail 'Only what can be thought, can be.' If, then, we grant Kristin her interesting assumptions that (1) without words nothing could be thought and (2) without letters there would be no words, we get the fascinating conclusion 'Without letters there could be no world.'

Both these anecdotes from Kristin show how the thought of a



child may be a priceless gift to a parent or teacher with ears to hear. And both of them also give us reason to think of philosophy as, in part, an adult response to the questions of childhood.

The twentieth century has seen an amazing growth in the study of childhood. Two ideas have been central to the way childhood has been studied in our time. One is the idea that children develop and that their development is a *maturational* process. In part, maturation is, quite obviously, a biological process. Children grow bigger, their legs and arms grow longer, baby faces grow into older-looking faces, baby teeth fall out and are replaced by adult teeth, and so on. But maturation is also a psychological and social process. Baby talk, baby thoughts, and baby behavior are replaced by the talk, thoughts, and behavior of young children, then by that of older children, adolescents, and, finally, adults.

The second idea central to the recent study of childhood is that growth takes place in identifiable *stages*. As school teachers can testify, the stages of biological growth children experience can be correlated only roughly with their actual ages. Thus one child in a given class will tower over the rest, while another has yet to catch up with the class average. But the stages of biological, as well as intellectual and social, growth are at least broadly related to age. Putting the idea of maturation and the idea of a sequence of age-related stages together, we get the conception of child development as a maturational process with identifiable stages that fall into an at least roughly age-related sequence.

Clearly maturation has a goal; its goal is maturity. Early stages are superseded by later stages that are automatically assumed to have been less satisfactory. Thus the "stage/maturational model" of child development, as we can call it, which has found unquestioned acceptance in the study of childhood, has an evaluational bias built into it. Whatever the biological or psychological structures in a standard twelve-year-old turn out to be, the stage/maturational model of development guarantees, before any research is

done at all, that these structures will be more nearly satisfactory than the superseded structures of, say, a six-year-old.

In many areas of human development this evaluational bias seems quite appropriate. We don't want grown-ups, or even adolescents, to have to chew their adult-sized steaks with baby teeth. But when it comes to philosophy, the assumption is quite out of place. There are several reasons for this.

First, there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that, simply by virtue of growing up in some standard way, adolescents or adults naturally achieve an appropriate level of maturity in handling philosophical questions—in, for example, being able to discuss whether time might have had a beginning, or whether some supercomputer might be said to have a mind.

Second, it should be obvious to anyone who listens to the philosophical comments and questions of young children that these comments and questions have a freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match. Freshness and inventiveness are not the only criteria for doing philosophy well: discipline and rigor should also count heavily. And children can be expected to be less disciplined and less rigorous than their adult counterparts. Still, in philosophy, as in poetry, freshness and inventiveness are much to be prized.

I recently asked a college class to respond, in writing, to Tim's question from the beginning of *Philosophy and the Young Child*: "Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?" A mother in my class recalled that her daughter, then three and a half, had once asked, "Mama, are we 'live' or are we on video?" This child's question obviously bears an important resemblance to the traditional dream question. But it is also a delightfully fresh and new question, one that could not have been conceived before TV, indeed before the development of video cameras and VCRs.

Some features of the dream problem carry over into the video problem. Thus just as I might have had the thought, in my dream, that I am awake, so the word "live" might appear on the screen

when I am watching a video. But some features are new. Unlike the dream problem, the video problem suggests that our lives are already on tape, just waiting to be shown.

So children are often fresh and inventive thinkers. All too often, maturity brings with it staleness and uninventiveness. This is a second reason for rejecting the evaluational assumption built into the stage/maturational model of child development.

Third, Descartes taught us to do philosophy by "starting over." Instead of assuming the correctness of what my teachers have taught me, or what the society around me seems to accept, I am to make a fresh beginning to see if I can show by some means of my very own that I really do know whatever it is I claim to know. As college students soon learn in their first philosophy course, it isn't easy to rid oneself of adult assumptions, even temporarily, and even for a fairly circumscribed purpose. It isn't easy, that is, for adults. Children have far less of a problem. In a certain way, then, adult philosophers who follow Descartes in trying to "start over" are trying to make themselves as little children again, even if only temporarily. That is hard for adults. It is unnecessary for children.

It isn't that "starting over" is all there is to doing philosophy. That isn't true at all. But learning to be comfortable with "naïve" questions is an important part of doing philosophy well. Thus for this reason, as well as for the other two, when it comes to doing philosophy, the evaluational assumption of the stage/maturational model gets things all wrong.

Like the New Yorker's view of the United States, my view of children as little philosophers is a distortion. But so also is the conventional view of childhood as a development through a sequence of roughly age-related stages that aims at maturity. Sometimes, it seems, the best way to correct one distortion is to pair it with an appealing, but opposed, distortion. I hope that that is true in this case.

## 2

# Theories and Models of Childhood

Like many parents of our generation, my wife and I raised our children with a tattered copy of Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* close at hand. When a child's fever shot up in the middle of the night, it was comforting to find Dr. Spock saying, "Between the ages of 1 and 5 years, children may develop fever as high as 104°." And when a neighbor's child, at six months, still had no teeth, it was reassuring to be able to read to the neighbor from Dr. Spock, "One baby gets his first tooth at 3 months, another not till a year. Yet both are healthy, normal infants."<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the chapter titled "Your Baby's Development," however, Dr. Spock adopts a somewhat different tone. It is as if he were leaning back in his swivel chair and expatiating on grander themes. Section 351, which begins this chapter, carries the bold-print caption, "He's repeating the whole history of the human race." This first paragraph continues:

There's nothing in the world more fascinating than watching a child grow and develop. At first you think of it as just a matter of growing bigger. Then, as he begins to do things, you may think of it as "learning tricks." But it's really more complicated and full of meaning than that. Each child as he develops is retracing the whole history of mankind, physically and spiritually, step by step. A baby starts off in the womb as a single tiny cell, just the way the first living thing appeared in the ocean. Weeks later, as he lies in the

the advice of someone else we trust. But what might lead us to accept, or reject, Dr. Spock's recapitulation theory of childhood? For that matter, why do we need a theory of childhood in the first place? And what difference might it make whether we accept the one Dr. Spock promotes, or some other theory, or none at all?

Before I try to say a little in answer to these questions, I want to reflect for a moment on the naturalness with which we accept the idea that we need a good theory of childhood. I once visited a very good middle school to talk with teachers there about the possibility that they might do philosophy with their children. During the discussion one of the teachers asked me what the thinking of fourth graders was like. At first I thought this teacher was testing me. I thought that, knowing well himself what the thinking of fourth graders was like, he wanted to see if I knew, too. However, I soon had to reject that hypothesis.

After I had made one or two tentative comments, the situation suddenly struck me as ludicrous. The man who had asked the question was a very experienced teacher of fourth-grade children, whereas I had never in my life taught the fourth grade, or indeed, elementary school at any level. True, each of my own children had, by that time, passed through the fourth grade, and I had occasionally had philosophical discussions with small groups of elementary school children, including fourth graders. But by any reasonable measure I had had relatively little experience with the children this experienced fourth-grade teacher was asking me about. If anything, *he* was the expert, and certainly the professional, I was the novice, the amateur. Why should I, a teacher of university students, be able to tell him about the thinking of the very creatures he spent his working days with, when I saw them only very occasionally?

I think the answer is that this teacher had become used to the idea that university professors have *theories* about children—about how they think, how they behave, and what they are like *at this*

amniotic fluid in the womb, he has gills like a fish. Toward the end of his first year of life, when he learns to clamber to his feet, he's celebrating that period millions of years ago when man's ancestors got up off all fours. It's just at that time that the baby is learning to use his fingers with skill and delicacy. Our ancestors stood up because they had found more useful things to do with their hands than walking on them. The child in the years after 6 gives up part of his dependence on his parents. He makes it his business to find out how to fit into the world outside his family. He takes seriously the rules of the game. He is probably reliving that stage of human history when our wild ancestors found it was better not to roam the forest in independent family groups but to form larger communities. (229)

Here Dr. Spock draws on something well beyond his own clinical experience, indeed, well beyond the clinical experience of any other physician, to present a theory of childhood. His theory is the recapitulation theory. It is captured in the slogan "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," that is, the development of the individual repeats the development of the race or species.

Elements of the recapitulation theory can be traced back to the pre-Socratic philosophy of ancient Greece. But it was not until the nineteenth century that someone (the German biologist Ernst Haeckel) gave the theory a sophisticated modern formulation. A little later the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, in his classic work *Adolescence*, gave the theory one of its most influential statements. Other modern thinkers who have given some credence to the theory include Freud, Piaget, and Karl Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels—not to mention Dr. Benjamin Spock!<sup>2</sup>

We seem to know what Dr. Spock is doing when he gives us advice about teething, or about how high we can let the baby's temperature go before we get help. But what is he doing when he presents a theory of childhood?

Again, we can accept or reject Dr. Spock's advice about feeding or toilet training. It may go against our own experience, or against

stage or that. He was so used to the idea of experts' theories that he was quite prepared to suppose that some outsider from a university somewhere might be able to tell him what the people he knew best were really like.

It is, no doubt, mostly to psychologists that we look these days for theories of childhood. But educators, too, have theories, as do anthropologists and even language theorists, not to mention cultural historians and political scientists. Might a philosopher have anything useful to say about theories of childhood?

As I have already admitted, philosophers have been, on the whole, remarkably silent on the question of what a child is. But it would be rash to conclude from this that philosophy has nothing to contribute to the theoretical discussion of childhood. Philosophy in the past has been preoccupied with problematic concepts like space, time, causality, God, free will, and the like. As it turns out, the concept of a child is also problematic in ways that are philosophical.

The simplest theory as to what a child is we could call "the little person theory of childhood." According to that theory, a child is just a very small, because very young, human being. This is the theory one might accept when one thinks of child development as enlargement. As Dr. Spock puts it, "At first you think of [development] as just a matter of growing bigger."

Clearly there is, usually, a significant size difference between children and other human beings. Children are generally larger than infants, but smaller than adolescents and adults. This observation is not quite as innocuous as it might at first seem. It means that children, unlike most of the rest of us, are typically surrounded by "giants," some of whom bend over to converse with them, or even sit on the floor to be more on a level with them, but most of whom are content to enjoy their position of lofty superiority.

Much of the manufactured world around children is not appro-

priate to their size. Children may not be able to reach the light switch, or even the doorknob, let alone the door knocker (or the cookie jar!). The message this gives to children is unmistakable: "You are not (yet) a full member of society."

A child's size, moreover, is constantly changing. In fact, the topic of size is a common subject for adult remarks to and about children. "My, how you have grown!" says the adult, as the child squirms. In this respect children are quite unlike most adults. Adults may put on weight, or get pregnant, or go gray and wrinkled, and men, especially, may lose their hair. But for an adult it is in general okay, and sometimes even good, to be recognized, even after a long interval, as "looking just the same." A child, by contrast, is always in transition, and most obviously with respect to size. Children shouldn't continue to look just the same. They need to grow up. As a matter of natural course, this year's pants will soon be too short and last year's shoes have already been outgrown.

In the whimsical children's story *The Shrinking of Treehorn*, the hero, Treehorn, begins shrinking instead of growing.<sup>3</sup> Treehorn's parents and teachers give Treehorn the clear message that he is doing something wrong. He is failing to grow up as normal children do.

Children who grow faster than their age peers, or more slowly, are often made to feel that there is something wrong, even that they are *doing* something wrong. Not only is children's size thus in transition, there is also a normal *rate* of change.

So far, then, a child is a small, growing human being—bigger than an infant, but smaller than an adolescent. Is that all? How do we make our theory of childhood more interesting, and more complex?

We need to take account of development that is not just enlargement. In particular, we need to take account of cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Philosophers in the seventeenth century debated whether the

most important ideas we have as adults are innate, or whether they arise from experience we have had since infancy. The rationalists, like René Descartes, were innatists; the empiricists, like John Locke, were experientialists. Here is a passage in which Descartes speculates on the thinking of a fetus in its mother's womb:

This does not mean that I believe that the mind of an infant meditates on metaphysics in its mother's womb; . . . it seems most reasonable to think that a mind newly united to an infant's body is wholly occupied in perceiving or feeling the ideas of pain, pleasure, heat, cold and other similar ideas which arise from its union and intermingling with the body. Nonetheless, it has in itself the ideas of God, itself, and all such truths as are called self-evident, in the same way as adult humans have when they are not attending to them; it does not acquire these ideas later on, as it grows older.

Here is Locke, taking the experientialist side:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and foundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the *materials* of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE.<sup>4</sup>

The debate between innatism and experientialism has continued down to the present time, though the terms of reference have shifted somewhat. Today the leading experientialists are behaviorists, the most famous being B. F. Skinner. Behaviorists differ from Locke in that they forswear all interest in the contents of our minds. They view the mind as a "black box," rather than a "white paper" on which experience "writes." According to behaviorists, the way experience "writes" on human and other animal organisms is through operant conditioning. Or, to shift to another metaphor, "Operant conditioning shapes behavior as a sculptor shapes a lump of clay."<sup>5</sup>

The most prominent innatist of our time is the linguist Noam

Chomsky, who supposes that all of us are born with the structures of a universal grammar "wired in." The flavor of Chomsky's approach can be appreciated by noting what he has to say about what he calls "Plato's problem" that is, the problem of explaining how we can know as much as we do when the evidence available to us is so limited. "Much of the interest of the study of language, in my opinion," Chomsky writes,

lies in the fact that it offers an approach to Plato's problem in a domain that is relatively well circumscribed and open to inspection and inquiry, and at the same time deeply integrated in human life and thought. If we can discover something about the principles that enter into the construction of this particular cognitive system, the principles of the language faculty, we can progress toward a solution for at least one special and quite important case of Plato's problem. We can then ask whether these principles generalize to other cases . . . My own belief is that the principles . . . are in crucial respects specific to the language faculty, but that the approach may indeed be suggestive elsewhere . . .<sup>6</sup>

Suppose we reserve the term 'innatist' for people who, like Chomsky, think that the most basic cognitive structures do not evolve during the development of a human individual, though of course those structures may go from being *merely latent* to becoming *manifest*. Then we can make a fairly clean distinction between innatists and recapitulationists. For the recapitulationists the structures themselves are like Japanese flowers: they unfold during childhood. Moreover, the way in which they unfold repeats the way the human race has evolved and developed in history.

What difference does it make whether one is an experientialist, an innatist, or a recapitulationist about childhood? First off, we must admit that no one today is in a position to present an altogether adequate theory of childhood that would command the respect of developmental psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, and educational theorists. What we have instead are a number of

theoretical models that guide research in more limited ways and offer help in interpreting data. Some of these models fit neatly under the innatist, the experientialist, or the recapitulationist banner. Others fall under more than one category, or combine aspects of one orientation with something else, say, a theory of sexuality or a theory of human personality. Thus Piaget, for example, tries to combine all three of the models I have mentioned,<sup>7</sup> and Freud combines a recapitulationist model with his own theory of human sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Theoretical models have the virtue of suggesting connections we might not have made without them. But as long as we have alternative models, each useful in its own way but none clearly and obviously superior to all the rest, we should be on the lookout for what a given model may encourage us to overlook, or misunderstand, as well as for what that model may help us understand better.

Consider the recapitulation model, with which we began. By appeal to the recapitulation model Dr. Spock encourages us to become fascinated with the way our baby grows and develops by thinking of that infant as "retracing the whole history of mankind, physically and spiritually, step by step." That is not a bad way to celebrate the growth and development of one's child.

The recapitulation model may be suggestive and helpful to the scientific researcher as well as to the parent. Elizabeth Bates, in her article "The Emergence of Symbols: Ontogeny and Phylogeny," explains how certain "component parts" of language (imitation, tool use, social motivation to share reference to objects) may have evolved separately in phylogeny and how developments in the infant just before language acquisition may be thought of as recapitulating the evolutionary sequence.<sup>9</sup>

is, by contrast, the experientialist model that lies behind research showing that babies learn to discriminate the basic of the language they hear around them even before they months of age. According to this research babies who

regularly hear English spoken in their presence are able to distinguish the sounds 'la' and 'ra' at six months, whereas babies who have heard Japanese instead are not.<sup>10</sup>

The innatist model guides other research in fruitful directions. In a paper called "Cognitive Basis of Language Learning in Infants" John Macnamara offers evidence that "infants learn their language by first determining, independent of language, the meaning which a speaker intends to convey to them, and by then working out the relationship between the meaning and the expression they heard." To be able to do this, Macnamara supposes, the infants must already have, wired into their neurology, a mental language. It is this innate "mentalese" that then gets expressed, he thinks, in the acquired, natural language—English, say, or Norwegian, or Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

There is another moral I wish to stress even more than the one about theoretical guidance. Children are not only objects of study; they are also, with us, members of what Kant called "the kingdom of ends." It is all right to be curious about them, and we should certainly feel responsibility for their education and welfare; but, above all, we owe them respect. And here is precisely where our theoretical models for understanding them may dehumanize them and encourage inappropriately condescending attitudes toward them.

Consider these recapitulationist sentiments of Carl Gustav Jung: "Childhood, however, is a state of the past . . . The child lives in a pre-rational and above all in a pre-scientific world, the world of people who existed before us."<sup>12</sup> A cause for concern here is the claim that children live in a pre-rational and pre-scientific world. That claim must be treated with great caution. Whereas it is certainly good to be warned that a child's ideas may, in a given context, be quite different from yours or mine, to maintain that children live in a pre-scientific and even pre-rational world is arrogant and inappropriately condescending.

For one thing, a young child may understand something about



the modern, scientific world better than most adults do. Take computers, or just video games. When the neighbor children from up the lane come to visit me, they sometimes bring their pocket video games with them. They try to explain to me what is happening when their little fingers press the keys on the keyboard so nimbly and effectively, but alas, they don't usually succeed. I am the one, I feel, who belongs to the pre-scientific world—certainly to the pre-video-game world!

As for the thought of children's being pre-rational, Piaget, perhaps more than anyone else, has shown us in dramatic ways how the responses of children may sometimes seem bafflingly irrational. (We shall explore that topic further in Chapter 4.) But sometimes children are also surprisingly rational, even wise. Consider the following example.

Some years ago a young mother came up to me after a talk I had given to tell me about taking her four-year-old son to see his grandfather, who was dying. The boy could see that the grandfather was in a bad way. (He died a week later.) On the way home the boy said to his mother, "When people are sick and ready to die, like Grandpa, do they shoot them?" The mother was shocked. "No," she replied, "the police wouldn't like that." (Here the mother's response was something Lawrence Kohlberg would put at a pre-moral stage of moral development; see Chapter 5.)

The boy thought a bit more and then said, "Maybe they could just do it with medicine."

It is quite possible that this four-year-old had seen or heard of some seriously ill or maimed pet or farm animal that was, as we say, "put out of its misery" by being shot. Why not Grandpa? The analogy is apt. It is part of what moves doctors to administer lethal doses to dying patients who are in misery; it is part of what moves many of us to agree that euthanasia, in certain circumstances, may be ethically acceptable, even ethically obligatory.

There is, in principle, no limit to the sophistication one may bring to the discussion of euthanasia. One can certainly invoke

moral theories and moral principles that one would not be able to explain to that four-year-old child. However, I suspect that most actual cases of euthanasia in our culture are conceived and carried out in terms that would be perfectly intelligible to that young child. If I am right, then this case counts as evidence against the recapitulationist idea that the child must live in a pre-rational world.

There may, of course, be very good reasons why that child's mother would not want to discuss euthanasia with him. But "He wouldn't understand" is not one of them. The recapitulationist model, insofar as it suggests that a four-year-old would necessarily be unable to understand what motivates a caring physician to give a lethal dose to a dying patient, or a caring daughter to consent to that act, gives us a bad reason for invoking what Kohlberg calls the "punishment-and-obedience orientation" and cutting off all discussion of the ethical issues involved in dealing with dying loved ones.

The models of development that theories of childhood offer to stimulate our research and challenge our attempts at understanding children may have many useful functions. But we must guard against letting those models caricature our children and limit the possibilities we are willing to recognize in our dealings with them as fellow human beings.